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The Fragile Fabric of Union: Cotton, Federal Politics, and the Global Origins of the Civil War.

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Review

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Schoen, Brian *The Fragile Fabric of Union: Cotton, Federal Politics, and the Global Origins of the Civil War.* The Johns Hopkins University Press, \$55.00
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Cotton's Effect on the Southern Political Economy

This excellent book begins by emphasizing the usefulness of studying past societies by investigating their leaders' views on political economy. This research method leads not to the determinism of pure economics nor to a purely legalistic or idealistic view of politics, but to the unraveling of a society's material interests, how those interests then shaped expectations of future activity, and how they entered into political calculations about how a society could be best served. Using the four cotton states of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi as the focus of his study, Brian Schoen has done a superb job of joining together the local pursuit of profit with leaders' attitudes toward slavery, liberalism, free trade, and the federal Union. He then extends the analysis a further notch by placing his study in a transatlantic perspective--how the political economy ideals of the main actors of these cotton states played out in the international realm. The overarching interpretation he offers is a rebuttal to historians writing in the vein of "Progressivism, classical Marxism, and dependency theory" who have depicted a South caught in the trap of a decaying social system, a tyrannical and inhospitable geography, and a ruinous anti-modernism (3). Rather, Schoen's portrayal of the Cotton South emphasizes capitalist change, entrepreneurship, calculation, an embrace of science and technology, a full allegiance to the principles of European liberalism, and overweening confidence about the future of cotton and slavery. Though Schoen's interpretation may have some exaggerations and omissions, it is a bravura performance destined to play a leading role in reshaping historical understanding of the Old South.

The monograph proceeds by chapters divided into chronological order, first the creation of the Atlantic cotton economy, next the troubles with England that ended in the War of 1812, then the tariff battles of the 1820s, followed by the Second Party System and the international issue of American expansionism, and finally the 1850s and the decision for separation. All the chapters have as a central theme the Cotton South's pursuit of profit by expanding cotton production through the use of slave labor. Cotton stood at the center of southern consciousness, and Schoen relates dramatically how southerners deemed cotton to be of such importance that certainly northerners and Europeans would rationally understand that only by use of slave labor could the world demand for cotton be met. Schoen's discussion of the southern interpretation of the failure of British West Indies to yield satisfactory production totals compared to the system of slavery is not only instructive but does yield some credence to the antebellum southern belief that Europeans surely would have to reassess their views on slavery. (This discussion is much in line with current assessment of the effect of emancipation economically; see Stanley L. Engerman, *Slavery, Emancipation, and Freedom: Comparative Perspectives* [2007]).

Another interpretation that ranges throughout the chapters is the Cotton South's embrace of free trade theory. The immediate interest of the Cotton South's political representatives in obtaining free trade is obvious enough, and Schoen charts well the pursuit of free trade goals of individuals from these states from 1789 to 1860. What Schoen does, however, is give this pursuit something of an idealistic twist, for he does not see it as simply motivated by obvious materialism. Rather, free trade theory broadened out into the embrace of nineteenth-century Liberalism, the Liberalism of John Stuart Mill, John Bright, and Richard Cobden. The awkwardness of such an embrace--European liberals had no use for slavery in their celebration of individualism and laissez faire--has impressed all kinds of scholars as being paradoxical and probably irrational (for example, Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* [1969]). Schoen argues that southerners were neither paradoxical nor irrational in their exaltation of liberal principles, that their fidelity to them went beyond self-interest. They avoided the trap of slavery's violation of liberal principles by racism: nineteenth-century liberalism belonged to Europeans, not Africans. But the point Schoen makes is that southerners warmly embraced the liberal values of their age and were not being transformed by the institution of slavery into worshippers of medieval principles.

In terms of political activity, Schoen paints an interesting picture of southerners casting a wary eye at England and her policies while always remembering how important the British market was to the prosperity of their states, and the growing numerical majority of the free labor North. Schoen has two subsidiary interpretations here which are innovative and intriguing. First, the Jeffersonian coalition was decidedly different from the Jacksonian coalition because Jefferson and Madison operated politically on a pragmatic alliance with northerners that included commercial retaliation. Jacksonian politicians discarded Jefferson's willingness to break free trade rules, thereby producing a political party that seemingly was more southern in its policy advocacy and which made southerners appear more belligerent, arrogant, and unyielding in their demands. In effect, Schoen has provided the political economy background for understanding why northerners perceived an aggressive Slave Power in the 1840s and 1850s. The second interpretation, and probably more controversial, is Schoen's analysis of Jay's Treaty. Engaging in a counterfactual argument, Schoen notes that American cotton did not really start going to England until after 1795; England did have possibilities of other suppliers in India, Africa, and the West Indies. But because Jay's Treaty opened up much of the British empire to American trade and produced a peaceful relationship with Great Britain until 1807, the cotton states secured their position as the chief supplier of cotton in the English textile industry. In an interesting speculation, Schoen considers the alternative possibilities that might have arisen had the United States not signed Jay's Treaty and hostile relations continued.

Schoen offers a number of observations on the rise of the proslavery argument, southern expansionism, and trade policy under Jefferson (the Embargo episode and northern behavior connected with it) which deserve evaluation by specialists, but I will eschew those topics to get to what I think is a major contribution--actually, a gigantic contribution--to the literature on Civil War causation. As various scholars pile up North-South differences, a question keeps arising: What kept the Union together between 1776 and 1861? Why separation in 1861 and not earlier? To this Schoen provides an answer that is, I think, absolutely correct--one to which I have been tending for a number of years now. The United States was born into a world marked by contest and conflict between empires. Schoen reveals this aspect brilliantly by stressing how weak the southern states were in the 1780s and how desperately they needed alliances with the northern states to ward off the Spanish, French, and British empires. But in the Texas annexation, a new feature of the world, and especially of the

Americas, was revealed: the French and Spanish empires no longer counted in the future of the Americas, and the British were in retreat. The British tamely submitted to United States' annexation of Texas and did nothing to aid Mexico in the United States-Mexican War of 1846-1848. Indeed, Schoen insightfully recounts the diplomacy of the 1850s to show that British political leaders (Palmerston, no less) agreed that the United States was destined to be the imperial ruler of North and South America and that Great Britain should tamely submit to the deed. The removal of imperial contest over North America was the absolutely necessary condition that made Cotton Southerners believe a southern confederacy was possible and could survive successfully in the international arena. This interpretation thus explains why the South remained attached to the Union from 1776 to 1848--fear of foreign invasion by European imperial powers--and why the Cotton States felt secession in 1861 was necessary and possible--no European imperial power to contend with and the differences with northern states now posed the most immediate danger to southern prosperity.

There is now a spate of scholarship appearing on the antebellum South affirming its modernity, its capitalist ethics, and its liberalism, and Schoen certainly joins this new scholarship. (For example, Aaron W. Marrs, *Railroads in the Old South: Pursuing Progress in a Slave Society* [2009]; Frank Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War* [2004], and William K. Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House; Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century South* [2003]). While this literature is a vital corrective to an interpretation that stressed too much the plantation South as a medieval leftover in a capitalist world--and a corrective that I believe in--one should probably be a little more reticent in pushing antebellum southerners too far into the mainstream of modernization. The agrarianism of the Old South remained a relic of older times, the attachment to kinship harkened back to older social patterns, the elevation of honor--however much overdone by historians--was a feature peculiar to the South, and the social relationships of slavery on the plantation did not well fit the patterns that would come to characterize twentieth-century America. What made the antebellum South unique was perhaps its bizarre mixture of old and new, a mixture that has vexed historians' descriptive abilities. Regardless of this reservation, Brian Schoen has written an immensely important history of southern political economy, one that is destined to be prominent in future studies of the Old South.

James L. Huston has written The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War (1987), Securing the Fruits of Labor: The American Concept of Wealth

Distribution, 1765-1900 (1998), Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights and the Economic Origins of the Civil War (2003), and Stephen A. Douglas and the Dilemmas of Democratic Equality (2007). *He is currently investigating the economic history of the United States in the nineteenth century and its relationship to the free labor ideology.*